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By **Yael Almog**  
May 25, 2021

**TRADITIONS**

# Hannah Arendt



*Hannah Arendt argued that interreligious difference and Christian theology are steady influences on political movements, action, and thought.*

Notwithstanding her vast engagement with theology, Hannah Arendt is considered an outsider to the intellectual milieu most readily associated with political theology. Arendt thus refrains from the Schmittian all-encompassing characterization of modern political institutions as containing a hidden theological legacy. Peter E. Gordon argues that in contrast to Carl Schmitt, who held that politics is essentially theological, “among Arendt’s most salutary insights was that political theology only holds us in its grip if we bring to politics an expectation of metaphysical or ‘eternal’ peace of a sort that worldly politics seems forever unable to satisfy” (874). While Arendt depicts theology’s impact on politics as contingent, the following essay demonstrates that her thought holds a

steady reference to theology, describing its impact on politics affirmatively. According to several of her main works, religious notions facilitate individuals' access to political power even as they do so in sporadic and ever-changing manners. An overview of several of Arendt's works—with focus on her *Love and Saint Augustine*, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*—demonstrates two threads that envelop the connection of politics to religion: first, a conceptualization of theological notions as evocative of political action and second, an examination of Jewish history that exerts a critique of the European nation state. These two threads encapsulate Arendt's divergence from liberal thought because they challenge the liberal endorsement of secularism and, correspondingly, protective depictions of religious minorities.

### **Neighorly Love and Communal Life**

Arendt's observations on theological notions benefitting interpersonal interactions played an important role in her early thought. Her doctoral dissertation offered an analysis of St. Augustine's thought. Arendt revised the work in the 1960s and altered much of its discussion of theology to address her later views on politics. Nonetheless, the final English translation, which builds on those revisions, only appeared posthumously, in 1996. Arendt observes that Augustine's thought centered on a conflict between his neo-Platonic adherence to a transcendental notion of love and a notion of accountability grounded in relationships between fellow humans. The Christian notion of *caritas* seeks to reconcile the human search after the divine through the love of fellow human beings. The command to love one's neighbor is a charged dictum: it opts to surpass the initial disparity between the transcendental and the worldly objects of human love. Augustine's notion of neighborly love presumes the coexistence of beings in the world and conceptualizes their relationship to one another as uneasy.

The published English version of the work correlates Augustine's thought to Arendt's notion of "natality." This notion is central to Arendt's observations on political participation and action that are pertinent to her thought, particularly during the 1960s. In Arendt's reading, St. Augustine juxtaposes birth to the creation of the world. Human life signals a fresh start. A birth of an individual resembles the beginning of history. The beginnings of human beings' lives mark their capacity to act in the world. An individual is aware of the concurrent presence of other human beings who possess this ability. In Arendt's mind, Augustine is a theoretician of equality. In emphasizing our kinship with the biblical Adam, Augustine referred to all humans as standing before God equal in their sinfulness.

Under the impact of existentialism, particularly Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, Arendt presents Augustine as a pioneering theoretician of human existence. For Arendt, Augustine is a constitutive figure for modern notions of civil order (as she develops in her lecture "What is Freedom?"—a chapter in her 1961 book, *Between Past and Future*). Under the influence of early Christianity, free will is interlinked with the notion of sin and the corresponding idea that one may act against one's best interest. The notion of freedom has been internalized

and correlated to one's ability to will. Contextualizing this historical transformation from a critical stance, Arendt views the agonized will that operates against the self as leading to the association of power with oppression.

Importantly for Arendt, Augustine disseminates this influential Christian emphasis on free will while at the same time complicating the impact encapsulated in this emphasis. For Arendt, the Christian notion of free will shifts the definition of freedom to focus on will rather than on action. While presenting the notion of free will as it was conceptualized by Paul, Augustine entertains, at the same time, an emphasis on human existence that is centered on action—a move that Arendt endorses. Arendt's comments on Augustine follow the difference she draws between "initium," the capacity to begin anew that is contained in the birth of each individual, and freedom, with the conflicted emphases (on the inner self and on action) that freedom encapsulates in post-Christian political thought. Note that Arendt takes the understanding of freedom as centered on will (rather than on action) as pertinent to modern political thought. It follows that Augustine supplies keys to return to action as the ultimate, productive core of freedom.

### **Religious Difference and Political Participation**

According to Arendt, Jewish history is emblematic of tensions at the core of the European nation state, a political entity that ostensibly promotes, since the late Enlightenment, its citizens' equal political rights. Arendt suggests that the emancipation brought about by the late Enlightenment builds on the rights that European rulers had granted to certain elites. The social functions of court Jews, individuals who fulfilled high functions, particularly financial, in service of royalty, had facilitated such rights. The figure of the court Jew is the basis of Arendt's portrayal of "The Jew as Pariah." This title establishes that Jews could never become genuine political agents in Europe: Jews may be either aware of their exclusion and reflect it in their cultural artefacts (the Jews as pariahs) or else they attempt incessantly to assimilate, efforts that result in their conditional and temporary toleration (Jews as parvenus). Arendt's work on Rahel Varnhagen, a prominent Jewish intellectual, scrutinizes the latter's life choices and role in European society. In such enquires, Arendt focuses on Jewishness as a social categorization that guides individuals' incessant and ultimately unfruitful attempt to assimilate.

Did the Enlightenment primarily advance the treatment of all individuals as equal political agents, or did it expand minority rights, which had been granted exclusively to groups that had benefited the authorities? In her *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt presents this question as naming a conflict at the core of the European nation states. Arendt portrays European Jews' attempts to gain equal political rights as emblematic of a paradox of modern statehood. Modern European states have opted to grant their members rights, but at the same time, they have made political membership conditional and contingent. According to the *Origins of Totalitarianism's* historiographical account, Jewishness receded as a marker of religion, becoming primarily an ethnic identity. This original depiction of dynamics pertinent to modern statehood builds Arendt's



account of a minority as an elusive presence that has sporadic exchanges with state authorities and intellectual elites. In this way, her analysis significantly differs from the liberal view that religious minorities are decisively excluded from state power.

### **Freedom, Equality and Action**

Arendt's *The Life of the Mind* (published posthumously in 1977/8) explores further the will in a theological framework. In Arendt's reading, early Christianity accentuated the inner war generated by the human will with the agonizing mechanism of acting against one's best interest. In this context, Arendt refers again to Augustine as highlighting internalized human struggle, but credits him, at the same time, for conceptualizing creation in a manner that motivates individual action. In sum, Arendt's reliance on early Christianity leads her to define free will in stark opposition to the liberal understanding of freedom as ingrained in free choice. Her characterization of the virility of action through theological vocabulary shows the extent to which her political thinking opposes the view of secularization as the ultimate goal of political institutions (Moyn 2008, 73).

In several works, such as "Freedom and Politics: A Lecture" (1960), Arendt reiterates her view, established in her reading of Augustine, that freedom centers on the possibility of human action granted to individuals with their creation. Arendt draws attention to the conceptualization of freedom in early Christianity by thinkers who were anti-political—this was a tradition that feared the influence of the public sphere on the individual. Arendt refers to Augustine to clarify what she sees as the risk that totalitarianism bears for human freedom: it eliminates human initiative and spontaneity. Therefore, she argues, modern political transformations eradicate the capacity of miracles to change reality, i.e., the openness of human action in the world. *The Life of the Mind* revisits Augustine to define both the Christian internalization of will and the keys to go beyond this transformation by focusing on actions as bearing productive impact on reality.

### **Religion and the Social Realm**

As we have seen, the possibility of action animates, in Arendt's mind, human communal existence. It follows that the political sphere is a public realm that necessitates the equality of its participants. This presumption does not apply to the social realm, which accommodates individuals' free time and private inclinations. Participation in the social realm is voluntary. Therefore, political life does not, and should not, reconcile such social differences as religion, ethnicity, and race.

The distinction between the political and social realms stood at the center of Arendt's responses to debates on human rights. For instance, it informed Arendt's controversial stance on racial segregation, particularly in education. When protestors prevented nine black students from entering Little Rock High School in 1957, following the US Supreme Court's ruling that school segregation was unconstitutional, commentators asked whether upholding racial

segregation in schools was a basic right of citizens. In a provocative essay, Arendt agreed: the state cannot enforce racial integration just as it cannot enforce racial segregation in the social realm, which is the realm of voluntary association. In “Reflections on Little Rock,” she writes, “What equality is to the body politics—its innermost principle—discrimination is to society. Society is that curious, somewhat hybrid realm between the political and the private, in which since the beginning of the modern age, most men spent the greater part of their lives” (51).

“Reflections on Little Rock” refers to religion in two ways. First, it juxtaposes racism with antisemitism. At the beginning of the essay, Arendt equates Black individuals with Jews as subjects whose difference from hegemonic society is preserved in the social realm. She maintains, at the same time, that Black individuals are exceptional in that they are permanently “visible.” This trait is opposed, in her mind, to the “audible” presence of new immigrants. (She discusses new immigrants through the lens of Jewish mobility in such works as her essay “We Refugees,”) Some minorities appear more adept at hiding or blurring their exceptional presence. Religious minorities’ elusive claim to power, which Arendt traces in Jewish history, creates political conundrums that are at the core of democracy, as we have seen.

Second, “Reflections on Little Rock” suggests that, in contrast to political institutions that are inoperative in the social sphere, churches hold the power to regulate social discrimination: “The only public force that can fight social prejudices is the churches, and they can do so in the name of the uniqueness of the person, for it is on the principle of the uniqueness of souls that religion (and especially the Christian faith) is based” (53). This affirmative account of the social role of churches is another instance of Arendt’s curious anti-secularism, a trend that animates her challenges to liberal politics.

### **A Mundane Form of Evil**

*Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), another controversial work, takes in new directions both Arendt’s analysis of Jewish history in the West and her commentary on the afterlives of theological concepts with the work’s focus on evil. Arendt’s critique of the trial’s biases pertains to the State of Israel, a new political entity, and to its means of constituting its political sovereignty. A main strand in Arendt’s argument is that the nature of the Eichmann trial is theatrical. She argues that the trial served as a way for Israeli society to negotiate the memory of the Jewish Holocaust and to ultimately present Israel as the sole safe haven for Jews. The trial’s public stature opened discussions of such charged topics as the actions of the Jew councils (*Judenräte*), bodies that were accused of cooperation with the Nazis during the war and of biased conduct in saving specific Jewish individuals while sparing others.

How does Arendt’s famous depiction of Eichmann’s acts with the dictum “the banality of evil” relate to her conceptualization of action as a derivation of Christian theology? The book and the dictum at its center proclaim that an individual may be associated with evil without having intended to commit evil.

Eichmann's implication in evil acts thus works against the notion that evil acts indicate the corruption of the will. Eichmann's testimony pronounces that he did not think about the acts as he was committing them and did not silence his conscience. It follows that conscience derives from thinking.

Against the early Christian portrayal of the choice of evil as a fatal embrace of sin, Arendt's report on Eichmann shows evil as entrenched in everyday life with the automatism and institutional participation that this implies. Arendt's notion of the banality of evil could be examined, therefore, as a secular turn in her philosophy: a new conceptualization of human agency that is at odds with her earlier belief that human action is best understood through theological vocabulary. However, the banality of evil could also be understood as corresponding with the rise of distinctive modern phenomena, particularly, totalitarianism. Modernity has irreversibly transformed the individual: the openness of human action has largely come to a halt. The era of miracles has ceased.

What are the preconditions for political action? Who is able to become a part of a political community? In addressing these questions, Arendt takes theological notions to saturate political action. Arendt's comments on Augustine inform her account of human equality in the political realm because she takes him to stress that every human being is independent from the Creator since his or her moment of creation.

As we have seen, there are several links to political theology in Arendt's inquiries into the conditions for European fascism. Those conditions are entangled, first, with sporadic attempts to integrate Jews into European societies. Arendt registers throughout her oeuvre Jews' attempts at gaining social power by assimilating into European culture. Attempts at assimilation show that some Jewish individuals failed to acknowledge that exclusion was shared by all German Jews. While early Christian dogmas mark a vision of human equality in the political realm, Jewish-Christian difference animates Arendt's view of the social realm as one that should uphold interpersonal difference (racial, religious, ethnic, or other). A second link to fascism is in a persona that breaks with early Christian theology: an individual whose implication in sin does not fit with the theological definition regarding the corruption of the will. Arendt follows the possibility of theology to shape the efficacy of political acts since the beginning of Western civilization, but she takes the automatic nature of human acts under totalitarianism to herald a caesura in that tradition.

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By [Yael Almog](#)

**Yael Almog** is an assistant professor at the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham University. She previously held research positions in Berlin, Göttingen and Frankfurt am Main. Her recent monograph *Secularism and Hermeneutics* (The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019) examines exegesis as embedded in confessional belonging and challenges the modern presumption that interpretation is indifferent to religious concerns. Her research explores links between theology and literary theory; secularism and critical theory; and literature and political philosophy.

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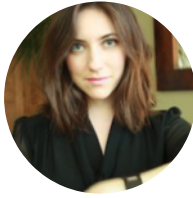
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